



*Final Report*

# Homelessness: re-shaping the policy agenda?

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for the  
**Australian Housing and Urban  
Research Institute**  
at RMIT University

April 2014

AHURI Final Report No. 221

ISSN: 1834-7223

ISBN: 978-1-922075-52-9



<b>Authors</b>	Chamberlain, Chris
<b>Title</b>	Homelessness: re-shaping the policy agenda?
<b>ISBN</b>	978-1-922075-52-9
<b>Format</b>	PDF
<b>Key words</b>	homelessness, policy issues, Census data
<b>Editor</b>	Anne Badenhorst                      AHURI National Office
<b>Publisher</b>	Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Melbourne, Australia
<b>Series</b>	AHURI Final Report; no. 221
<b>ISSN</b>	1834-7223
<b>Preferred citation</b>	Chamberlain, C. (2014) <i>Homelessness: re-shaping the policy agenda?</i> , AHURI Final Report No.221. Melbourne: Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. Available from: <a href="http://www.ahuri.edu.au/publications/projects/p53017">http://www.ahuri.edu.au/publications/projects/p53017</a> . [Add the date that you accessed this report. DD MM YYYY].

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This material was produced with funding from the Australian Government and the Australian state and territory governments. AHURI Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial and other support it has received from these governments, without which this work would not have been possible.

AHURI comprises a network of university Research Centres across Australia. Research Centre contributions, both financial and in-kind, have made the completion of this report possible.

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## **ACRONYMS**

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CNOS	Canadian National Occupancy Standard
FaHCSIA	Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
NAHA	National Affordable Housing Agreement

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Essay evaluates the new statistical definition of homelessness adopted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) for the purposes of counting the homeless population.

Chapter 1 provides background information. In 2008, the Australian Government published its White Paper on homelessness known as *The Road Home*. The White Paper quoted figures from *Counting the Homeless 2006* which used the cultural definition of homelessness and reported 104 700 homeless people on Census night 2006. The White Paper noted that the cultural definition was the most widely accepted definition of homelessness in Australia. However, in September 2012, the ABS adopted a new definition of homelessness, noting that it had never previously developed its own definition or adopted any other (ABS 2012a, p.9). The ABS subsequently released figures for the 2011 Census using its new definition, and revised figures for the 2001 and 2006 Censuses.

Chapter 2 begins by explaining the intellectual rationale for the cultural definition and the ABS definition. The cultural definition is an accommodation based definition which identifies people as homeless if they are in specified housing situations. The ABS definition is constructed from a conceptual framework which has three core elements: adequacy of the dwelling; security of tenure in the dwelling; and control of, and access to, space for social relations. It is important to note that under this definition the ABS classifies people living in conventional houses and flats as homeless if their dwelling lacks any *one* of these three elements (ABS 2012a, p.7). In this paper, people who meet this criterion are referred to as the *housed-homeless* population.

Chapter 3 reviews the main findings from the 2011 Census using the ABS definition. This chapter focuses on the number of homeless people, the social characteristics of the population, and the geographical distribution of the homeless. The homeless population grew from 89 728 in 2006 to 105 237 in 2011, an increase of 17 per cent. However, most (64%) of the growth was accounted for by an increase in the number of people living in overcrowded dwellings, up from 31 531 to 41 390. People living in overcrowded dwellings are part of the housed-homeless population. They live in conventional houses and flats but do not have privacy, safety and security in their dwellings.

Chapter 4 discusses the policy implications of moving from the cultural definition to the ABS definition. It focuses on six issues: the number of homeless people nationally; the number of homeless families; people in different age groups; Indigenous people; funding for the states and territories; and the housed-homeless. It shows that a re-writing of the policy agenda will be required to take into account the revised geographic distribution, size and characteristics of the homeless population using the ABS definition.

Chapter 5 notes that the ABS definition is difficult to operationalise using Census data and many of those in the housed-homeless population cannot be counted. This means that it is not possible to specify the overall number of homeless people using the ABS definition, nor is it possible to specify the age and gender breakdown. The geographical distribution of the population is also thrown into doubt and this has ramifications for the allocation of resources between the states and territories under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA).

# 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the Australian Government published its White Paper on homelessness known as *The Road Home*. It stated that:

The Australian Government, with the agreement of state and territory governments, has set two headline goals to guide our long term response to homelessness:

- Halve overall homelessness by 2020.
- Offer supported accommodation to all rough sleepers who need it by 2020.

(FaHCSIA 2008, p.viii)

The White Paper quoted figures from *Counting the Homeless 2006* (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008), which used the cultural definition to enumerate the homeless population and reported 104 700 homeless people on Census night 2006. It noted that the cultural definition, which distinguishes between primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness, was the most widely accepted definition of homelessness in Australia (FaHCSIA 2008, p.3). The Australian Government subsequently announced initiatives worth \$7.8 billion over five years to reduce homelessness, including the construction of 20 000 new public housing properties.

However, in September 2012, the ABS endorsed a new definition of homelessness, noting that it had never previously developed its own definition or adopted any other (ABS 2012a, p.9). The ABS definition is broader than the cultural definition because it includes as homeless people living in conventional houses and flats if they lack privacy, safety and security of tenure in their dwelling. This Essay refers to these people as the *housed-homeless* population.

The ABS subsequently released figures for the 2011 Census, and new figures for the 2006 Census, which showed that in spite of government initiatives in relevant areas homelessness had increased from 89 700 in 2006 to 105 200 in 2011, an increase of 17 per cent (ABS 2012b). The ABS did not criticise the Australian Government but the sub-text was clear. Since 2008, the Australian Government had been directing substantial additional resources towards reducing homelessness, but the problem was actually getting worse.

The purpose of this Essay is to evaluate the new statistical definition of homelessness adopted by the ABS and to discuss the policy implications of moving from one definition to another.

Chapter 2 explains the intellectual rationale for the cultural and ABS definitions of homelessness. The chapter draws attention to a range of difficulties associated with the operationalisation of the ABS definition using existing Census data.

Chapter 3 reviews the main findings from the 2011 Census using the ABS definition of homelessness. The chapter focuses on the number of homeless people, the social characteristics of this population and the geographical distribution of people who are homeless in Australia.

Chapter 4 discusses the policy implications of moving from the cultural definition to the ABS definition of homelessness. It concludes that a re-writing of the policy agenda will be required to take into account the revised geographic distribution, size and characteristics of the homeless population when the ABS definition is applied.

Chapter 5 points out that the ABS definition is difficult to operationalise using existing Census data and many of those in the housed-homeless population cannot be

counted. This means that it is not possible to specify the overall number of homeless people using the ABS definition. The geographical distribution of the population is also thrown into doubt. This has ramifications for the allocation of resources between the states and territories under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA).

## 2 INTELLECTUAL RATIONALE

This chapter begins by reviewing the argument of the 1980s that definitions of homelessness must always take into account how people view their housing. It then summarises the cultural definition of homelessness, which focuses on where people stay once they have lost their housing, and goes on to explain the ABS statistical definition of homelessness. Finally, the operational categories used in the ABS statistical definition are described.

### 2.1 Debates in the 1980s

The definition of who is homeless ... has been as much a subject of debate as the question of how many homeless there are. (Peroff 1987, p.37)

The questions—What is homelessness? Who are the homeless? ... are I think simply unanswerable. (Field 1988, p.11)

In the literature of the 1980s there was no agreement as to how the concept of homelessness should be defined or whether it was of any analytical value. David MacKenzie and I became interested in this issue in the early 1990s when we were undertaking an evaluation of an after-hours information and referral service for homeless young people located in the centre of Melbourne. We needed to establish how many of the young people using this service were homeless.

One influential account in the 1980s said that definitions of homelessness must always take into account the perceptions of those being studied (see, e.g. Hoomb's & Snyder 1983; Watson 1986). In the United States, Hoomb's and Snyder (1983, p.135) stated that:

The only judge of an individual's need for shelter should be that individual. While it might appear that someone has viable alternatives available, these options cannot be assessed by a third party who has little or no knowledge of their adequacy, emotional ramifications or other limiting factors.

In Australia, the definition of the National Youth Coalition for Housing (1985, p.1) was particularly influential. It defined homelessness as:

The absence of secure, adequate and satisfactory shelter as perceived by the young person and for homelessness to exist at least one of the following conditions ... should be operative:

1. An absence of shelter.
2. The threat of loss of shelter.
3. Very high mobility between places of abode.
4. Existing accommodation considered inadequate by the resident for such reasons as overcrowding, the physical state of the residence, lack of security of occupancy, or lack of emotional support or stability in the place of residence.
5. Unreasonable restrictions in terms of alternative forms of accommodation.

The fundamental contention of this approach was that people are homeless if they do not find their accommodation satisfactory. This could include people who feel that their flat is in a bad state of repair ('the physical state of the residence'); people who do not get on with other family members ('a lack of emotional support'); and people who dislike their residence for other reasons (a person in public housing who dislikes it intensely). It also meant that a person who was objectively 'homeless' could be considered 'housed'. For example, a young man living in a squat would not be

considered 'homeless' within this framework if he had chosen this lifestyle and did not perceive his situation as problematic.

David MacKenzie and I concluded that a definition of homelessness that was based on individual judgment was unworkable from a research point of view. We wanted a statistical definition of homelessness that could measure whether people were 'homeless' or 'housed' in an objective way. This was the intellectual rationale for the cultural definition which we developed in the early 1990s (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992).

## **2.2 Cultural definition**

Many of the ideas informing the cultural definition of homelessness came from the 3000 case histories of young people who had used the Melbourne information and referral agency at which we worked and from our experiences during two years of fieldwork. Nonetheless, the cultural definition was presented as a theorised account (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992, pp.290–94).

The fundamental contention underpinning the cultural definition is that 'homelessness' is a relative concept that acquires meaning in relation to the housing conventions of a particular culture. In a society where the vast majority of the population live in mud huts, the community standard or cultural norm will be that mud huts constitute adequate accommodation (Watson 1986, p.10). Thus, the task of defining homelessness must start by identifying the minimum accommodation that people are expected to have in order to live according to the conventions and expectations of a particular culture.

In Australia, the vast majority of the population live in suburban houses or self-contained apartments, with 70 per cent of all households either owning or purchasing their home. There is a widespread view that home ownership is the most desirable form of housing tenure, and this is the 'dream' to which most Australians aspire. (Kemeny 1983, p.1; Hayward 1992, p.1; Badcock & Beer 2000, p.96). Thus, the minimum community standard is a small rental flat with a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom, and an element of security of tenure, because this is the minimum that most people achieve in the private rental market. While the minimum community standard is not specified in any formal regulations, it is embodied in current housing practices.

Of course, the concept of 'housed' and 'homeless' constitute a continuum of circumstances, and it is important to recognise that there are a number of groups on the margins. There are also a number of institutional settings where people do not have the level of accommodation identified in the cultural standard, but in cultural terms they would not be considered part of the homeless population. They include, amongst others, people in seminaries, elderly people in nursing homes, students in university halls of residence and prisoners.

The cultural definition leads to the identification of three groups in the homeless population. The model is shown in Table 1.

Primary homelessness refers to people living on the streets, sleeping in parks, squatting in derelict buildings or using cars or railway carriages for temporary shelter. It is operationalised using the Census category 'improvised homes, tents and sleepers out'.

Secondary homelessness refers to people living in various forms of emergency accommodation (refuges, hostels etc.) and people staying temporarily with other households because they have no accommodation of their own. In the original paper (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 1992), people staying temporarily in rooming houses were

classified in the secondary population, but in the Census they cannot be disaggregated from other boarding house residents (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008). Nowadays, all boarding house residents are treated as part of the tertiary homelessness population (FaHCSIA 2008, p.3).

**Table 1: Cultural definition of homelessness**

<p><i>Culturally recognised exceptions:</i> where it is inappropriate to apply the minimum standard, for example seminaries, gaols, student halls of residence</p>	<p><i>Marginally housed:</i> people in housing situations close to the minimum standard.</p>
	<p><i>Tertiary homelessness:</i> people living in single rooms in private boarding houses without their own bathroom, kitchen or security of tenure.</p>
	<p><i>Secondary homelessness:</i> people moving between various forms of temporary shelter including friends, emergency accommodation, youth refuges and hostels.</p>
	<p><i>Primary homelessness:</i> people without conventional accommodation (living on the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, under bridges, in parks, etc.).</p>

Note: *Minimum community standard:* equivalent to a small rented flat with a bedroom, living room, kitchen and bathroom.

Source: Chamberlain and MacKenzie 2008, p.3

Boarding house tenants are homeless because their accommodation does not have the characteristics identified in the minimum community standard. Boarding house residents have only one room for eating and sleeping and do not have private kitchen and bathroom facilities. The facilities they use are shared with other tenants and their accommodation is not self-contained. Often, they have no right of tenure as provided by a lease.

The cultural definition of homelessness is a 'statistical definition' because the number of persons in each of the categories can be quantified. Thus, the cultural definition appealed to people in the ABS. At the 1996 Census, the ABS decided to target Australia's homeless population with a special enumeration strategy:

From the outset, it was also clear that for the Strategy to succeed, a definition was required of exactly which people would be regarded as homeless. The definition of homelessness which was adopted was proposed by Chamberlain and MacKenzie (Northwood 1997, p.6).

The term 'cultural definition of homelessness' was used for the first time in *Counting the Homeless*, published by the ABS in 1999 (Chamberlain 1999). The publication of the ABS paper dramatically raised the profile of the cultural definition because there were now numbers attached to the various categories of homelessness. Over time, the cultural definition became known as the ABS definition of homelessness. *Counting the Homeless 2006* began with the words: 'The ABS uses the cultural definition of homelessness to enumerate the homeless population' (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008, p.vii).

### 2.3 ABS statistical definition

In September 2012, the ABS released a publication entitled: *Information paper—a statistical definition of homelessness* (ABS 2012a). The paper noted that '[u]p until 2008, the ABS had neither developed its own definition of homelessness nor adopted any other definition' (ABS 2012a, p.9). It claimed that the ABS subsequently had 'identified the need to develop a robust, defensible and evidence informed definition of

homelessness for statistical purposes' (ABS 2012a, p.10). In doing so it sought to address the fundamental question of what it was to have a 'home'.

The ABS approach was concerned to identify:

... the core elements of 'home' in Anglo American and European interpretations of the meaning of home as identified in research evidence (Mallett 2004). These elements may include: a sense of security, stability, privacy, safety, and the ability to control living space. Homelessness is therefore a lack of one or more of the elements that represent 'home'. (ABS 2012a, p.7)

The ABS view endorsed the 1980s perspective that definitions of homelessness should take into account people's *perceptions* of homelessness. Thus people living in conventional houses and flats were deemed to be homeless if they believed that their dwelling failed to provide them with privacy, safety and security. In essence, one can be housed and homeless at the same time.

## 2.4 Conceptual framework and operational issues

The new ABS statistical definition was constructed from a conceptual framework with three core elements. These relate to:

- adequacy of the dwelling; and
- security of tenure in the dwelling; and
- control of, and access to space for social relations. (ABS 2012a, p.7)

Control of, and access to space for social relations covers privacy, safety, security and a range of other characteristics that make a dwelling into a 'home'.

Under the new definition a person is considered to be homeless if their current living arrangement:

- is in a dwelling that is inadequate; or
- has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable; or
- does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations. (ABS 2012a, p.7)

It is important to note that under this definition the ABS classifies people living in conventional houses and flats as homeless if their dwelling lacks any *one* of these three elements (ABS 2012a, p.7). In this paper, people who meet this criterion will be referred to as the *housed-homeless* population.

However, the ABS attached a caveat to its core criteria. The caveat states that people should be excluded from the homeless count if they are homeless by choice and have accommodation alternatives. How people are enumerated in the three core categories is explained next. After that, the difficult task of identifying people who have chosen homelessness is discussed.

*Adequacy of the dwelling* refers to whether the structure of the dwelling renders it fit for human habitation and includes whether the building is being used for the purposes for which it is zoned. The dwelling must therefore provide proper kitchen and bathroom facilities and should not be an improvised structure. Similarly, the house or apartment should satisfy the relevant building codes and not have any improvement or control orders on it.

However, a number of issues arise in respect to the operationalisation of the new ABS definition of homelessness. The ABS Census of Population and Housing (Census)

does not gather information on the quality of kitchen and bathroom facilities, or whether buildings are being used for the purposes for which they have been zoned, or whether dwellings have improvement or control orders on them. It is therefore impossible to operationalise this part of the ABS definition using Census data.

The second element in the ABS conceptual framework is *security of the dwelling*. This covers a person's legal right to occupy their accommodation with stability and security of tenure. This can be achieved by owning the property, with or without a mortgage, or renting the accommodation with a formal lease. In some cases tenants may have rights that can be enforced through common law. This includes familial security of tenure such as the circumstance of children living with their parents.

While the Census gathers information on whether private dwellings are owned or rented, it does not gather information on whether people in private rental accommodation have a lease. This distinction is important in terms of homelessness and security of housing tenure.

The third element in the ABS conceptual framework is *access to space for social relations*. This relates to the extent to which a household (or individuals within that household) has control over and access to social and physical space such that they can pursue 'normal' social relations in a safe and secure setting. In this context the living space must be sufficient to enable individuals in the household to have privacy when sleeping, undertake recreational and leisure activities, and for the household to have exclusive access to a kitchen and bathroom as required. The dwelling must provide for a safe and secure environment where people feel supported and affirmed.

In order to operationalise this criterion one therefore requires:

- Evidence about each person's relationships with significant others in their household.
- Information about how much personal space people have and whether they consider it to be adequate.
- Evidence about the extent to which people feel safe, secure and supported in their accommodation.

The Census currently does not collect this level of evidence.

## 2.5 Overarching rule

The ABS definition states that people are homeless if they lack one or more of the following: an adequate dwelling; security of tenure in their dwelling; and access to space for social relations. However, the ABS has an overarching rule that individuals should be excluded from the homelessness count if their living circumstance mirrors that of a homeless person but is one of choice: that being, the person has the capacity and means to live differently but chooses a particular lifestyle.

People who lack one or more of these elements are not necessarily classified as homeless. While homelessness is not a choice, some people may *choose* to live in situations that might parallel the living situations of people who are homeless, for example living in a shed while building a home on their own property, or on holiday travelling and staying with friends. These people have *choice* because they have the capacity to access other accommodation alternatives that are safe, adequate and provide for social relations. (ABS 2012a, p.11, emphasis added)

Such people might 'choose' to live in housing that is inadequate, has no security of tenure or no space for social relations; the key distinction is that they have the

capacity to choose to live elsewhere if they wish. This will be referred to as 'choosing homelessness'.

The ABS specifies four conditions that must be fulfilled in order to demonstrate that someone has chosen homelessness. First, it must be shown that the person has sufficient 'income, wealth and savings that would allow them to access suitable accommodation' (ABS 2012a, p.12). This involves assessing whether the individual has sufficient funds to set up a small flat in the current rental market and takes into account the cost of a suitable property, bond, one month's rent in advance, fees for connecting utilities and so forth. Additionally, the person must have sufficient disposable income to maintain rental payments and services. The level of information required to make such an assessment is not collected by the Census.

The second condition is whether the person has 'the physical capabilities to allow them to access suitable accommodation' (ABS 2012a, p.12). The ABS notes that '[s]ome physical impairments may prevent a person from being able to seek out, access and sustain suitable accommodation' (ABS 2012a, p.12). It is not clear what 'physical impairments' the ABS has in mind, but this sort of judgment arguably is beyond the scope of the information collected in the Census.

Third it must be shown that a person has:

... the psychological means to allow them to seek out and access suitable accommodation. Some types of mental illnesses or cognitive injuries may prevent a person from being able to seek out, access and sustain suitable accommodation. (ABS 2012a, p.12)

Similarly, the level of information required to inform such an assessment would be beyond the scope of the Census.

Finally, in order to establish 'choice', it needs to be demonstrated that the person has sufficient 'personal means to allow them to access suitable accommodation' (ABS 2012a, p.12). This includes whether an individual has sufficient 'qualification[s] or skills to gain employment' and sufficient 'support outside of the household' to sustain the housing. While the Census gathers information on qualifications, it does not collect information on external supports.

The *overarching rule* states that an individual can be removed (statistically) from the homeless population if it can be established that the person has 'the financial, physical, psychological *and* personal means' (ABS 2012a, p.11) to access conventional housing. Given the breadth of considerations that must inform these conditions, it is clear that much of the information required to operationalise the ABS schema could not be obtained from the Census.

This is acknowledged to some extent in the following statement:

The operationalisation of the definition in each data source should clearly articulate which aspects of the definition have been measured, and which aspects could not be fully operationalised within the collection. (ABS 2012a, p.23)

However, there is no such statement in the 'Summary of Findings' which precedes the presentation of the statistical findings in the ABS (2012b) publication *Census of Population and Housing: Estimating Homelessness*, nor is it made clear in Appendix 2 ('Estimation Methodology') which aspects of the definition of homelessness were measured. There is no statement as to the total number of people who were removed from the homelessness count because they had 'chosen' homelessness. The ABS

should have provided this information along with a clear statement of how these people were identified.

## 2.6 Operational categories

As the previous section demonstrates, there is some doubt as to how well the ABS has operationalised its conceptual framework. Nonetheless, the ABS reports that six groups in the homeless population can be identified using Census data. These groups are shown in Table 2.

The first five ABS operational categories are similar to the categories used in the cultural definition (Table 2), except that the ABS categories exclude people who have 'chosen' to become homeless, although it is unclear how this was established. The ABS category 'improvised dwellings, tents and sleepers out' is similar to 'primary homelessness'. People in supported accommodation or staying temporarily with other households are included in the secondary homeless population, and people in boarding houses or other temporary lodgings are included in the tertiary population.

**Table 2: Comparison of ABS operational categories and cultural definition**

ABS operational categories	Cultural definition
1 Improvised dwellings, tents or sleepers out	1 Primary homelessness
2 Supported accommodation for the homeless	2 Secondary homelessness
3 Staying temporarily with other households	3 Secondary homelessness
4 Boarding houses	4 Tertiary homelessness
5 Other temporary lodgings *	
6 Severely crowded dwellings	

Note: \* Included in tertiary population but not a separate analytical category

The ABS operational definition is broader than the cultural definition because it includes in the homelessness population people living in severely crowded houses or flats. These dwellings are assessed by the ABS against the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (CNOS) as requiring four or more additional bedrooms to adequately accommodate each person in the household.

The CNOS assesses the number of bedrooms required by a household using the following rules:

- There should be no more than two persons per bedroom.
- Children less than 5 years of age of different sexes may reasonably share a bedroom.
- Children less than 18 years of age and of the same sex may reasonably share a bedroom.
- Single household members aged 18 years and over should have a separate bedroom, as should parents or couples.
- A lone person household may reasonably occupy a bed sitter (cited in ABS 2012b, p.92).

Occupants of severely crowded dwellings (requiring four or more extra bedrooms) are considered to be homeless because they lack access to space for social relations and cannot maintain privacy and safety in their accommodation:

When people are subjected to severe, sustained overcrowding, all persons in the dwelling experience the absence of access to personal space, regardless of personal tenures. For example, while some people in a dwelling may own it, and many others also occupy the dwelling as their usual residence, the access to personal space of all is compromised. ... all people living in the severely overcrowded dwelling do not have control, or access to space for social relations. (ABS 2012a, p.15)

According to the ABS, therefore, each person in a 'severely overcrowded' dwelling is homeless, regardless of their own view of their situation or housing tenure. The operationalisation of the definition included people in dwellings that were owned outright or being purchased (20% of all severely crowded dwellings) (see ABS 2012b, p.53). These dwelling had 7550 residents. According to the ABS, the defining characteristic for homelessness here is overcrowding: that being, the number of occupants relative to the number of bedrooms.

If a dwelling required three (rather than four) additional bedrooms, then the ABS classified everyone in that dwelling as housed. The ABS (2012a) paper cited no empirical studies to substantiate its assumption that all people in households requiring three additional bedrooms feel safe and secure, whereas all people in households requiring four extra bedrooms do not. In fact, it seems unlikely that one could substantiate this point empirically. Whether people feel safe and secure in a dwelling is mediated by the character of the relationships between members of the household, not just the number of bedrooms that the property has. Some people in overcrowded dwellings probably feel safe and secure and others probably do not.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

The ABS definition states that people are homeless if their accommodation does not provide them with a sense of safety, security, privacy and so on. This requires information about how much space people have in their accommodation and whether they feel safe and secure in their property. However, the Census does not collect evidence about these matters.

The ABS also has an overarching rule that people should be excluded from the homeless count if they have 'chosen' homelessness. This is established by demonstrating that an individual has 'the financial, physical, psychological *and* personal means' to access conventional housing. However, the information required to operationalise this schema is not collected by the Census.

Finally, consistent with the CNOS measure of severe overcrowding, the ABS classifies people as homeless if four or more extra bedrooms are required because it is assumed that people in such households do not feel safe and secure in their dwelling. However, if the dwelling requires three (or fewer) additional bedrooms then everyone in the dwelling is assumed to be housed. No evidence is provided by the ABS to show that individuals feel safe and secure—or otherwise—in either circumstance. Questions as to how well the ABS has operationalised its conceptual framework continue.

### 3 MAIN FINDINGS

This chapter describes the main findings from the 2011 Census as reported by the ABS. It focuses on the number of homeless people, the social characteristics of the homelessness population and its geographical distribution in Australia. In this chapter, the figures reported by the ABS are taken on face value.

#### 3.1 Number of homeless people

Table 3 shows that the homeless population grew from 89 728 in 2006 to 105 237 in 2011, an increase of 17 per cent. There was a small increase in the number of people in boarding houses (up from 15 460 to 17 721), and an increase in the number of people in other temporary lodgings (up from 500 to 686). A somewhat larger increase of people in emergency accommodation was recorded (up from 17 329 to 21 258).

**Table 3: ABS homeless operational groups, 2006 and 2011**

	2006		2011	
	N	%	N	%
Improvised dwellings, tents or sleepers out	7,247	8	6,813	6
Supported accommodation for the homeless	17,329	19	21,258	20
Staying temporarily with other households	17,663	20	17,369	17
Boarding houses	15,460	17	17,721	17
Other temporary lodgings	500	1	686	1
Overcrowded dwellings	31,531	35	41,390	39
	89,728	100	105,237	100

Source: ABS 2012b, pp.16–17

However, most (64%) of the growth in the homeless population between 2006 and 2011 was accounted for by the rise in the number of people in overcrowded dwellings (up from 31 531 to 41 390). This category accounted for 35 per cent of the homeless population in 2006, increasing to 39 per cent in 2011. People living in severely crowded dwellings are treated as part of the housed-homeless population for the purposes of this analysis. They live in conventional houses and flats but do not have privacy, safety and security in their dwellings.

#### 3.2 Social characteristics

Although the homeless population grew by 17 per cent in the 2006 to 2011 inter-census period, as Table 4 demonstrates, the percentage of homeless people in different age groups did not change significantly.

In 2011, approximately two-fifths (41.9%) of homeless people were aged 24 or under, with 17 per cent of these (N=17 845) children under the age of 12. Another 44 per cent were adults aged 25 to 54, with the number peaking in the 25–34 year age group. The numbers were smallest in the 55 and over age groups, which accounted for 13.9 per cent of the homeless population in 2006 and 14.1 per cent in 2011.

**Table 4: Number of homeless people by age group, 2006 and 2011**

Age (years)	2006			2011		
	N	%	%	N	%	%
Under 12	15,715	17.5		17,845	17.0	
12–18	9,788	10.9	41.9	10,913	10.4	41.9
19–24	12,155	13.5		15,325	14.5	
25–34	15,848	17.7		19,312	18.3	
35–44	13,180	14.7	44.2	14,484	13.8	44.0
45–54	10,581	11.8		12,507	11.9	
55–64	6,950	7.7		8,649	8.2	
65–74	3,560	4.0	13.9	4,174	4.0	14.1
75 and over	1,951	2.2		2,028	1.9	
	89,728	100.0		105,237	100.0	

Source: ABS 2012b, pp.16–17

Table 5 shows the gender breakdown of the homeless population in 2011. Overall, 56 per cent of this population were male and 44 per cent were female, but there were marked differences in the gender composition in different accommodation categories. Three-quarters (75%) of the boarding house residents were male, as were 68 per cent of people in improvised dwellings or sleeping rough. There were slightly more men (56%) than women (44%) staying temporarily with other households, but roughly equal numbers of men and women in supported accommodation and in overcrowded dwellings. Women outnumbered men in other temporary lodgings by 57 to 43 per cent.

**Table 5: Homeless men and women by accommodation on Census night, 2011**

	Improvised dwellings etc. (N=6,812)	Supported accomm. (N=21,261)	Friends or relatives (N=17,368)	Boarding house (N=17,721)	Other temp. lodgings (N=686)	Overcrowded dwelling (N=41,389)	Total (N=105,237)
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Male	68	49	56	75	43	51	56
Female	32	51	44	25	57	49	44
	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: ABS 2012b, pp.32–33

### 3.3 Geographical distribution

In 2006, the rate of homelessness was between 34 and 48 per 10 000 in the five most populous states (New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia), and between 24 and 29 per 10 000 in Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory. In 2011, the rate was between 38 and 50 per 10 000 in the five most populous states, and lowest in Tasmania (see Table 6).

The outlier in each year was the Northern Territory where the rate was 792 per 10 000 in 2006 and 731 per 10 000 in 2011. People in overcrowded dwellings accounted for

85 per cent of the homeless population in the Territory in 2011, far higher than in any other state. Most people (98%) in this category were Indigenous.

**Table 6: Geographical distribution of homeless people, 2006 and 2011**

	2006		2011		Increase
	N	Rate per 10,000	N	Rate per 10,000	%
New South Wales	22,219	34	28,190	41	+26.9
Victoria	17,410	35	22,789	43	+30.9
Queensland	18,856	48	19,838	46	+5.2
South Australia	5,607	37	5,985	38	+6.7
Western Australia	8,277	42	9,592	43	+15.9
Tasmania	1,145	24	1,579	32	+37.9
Northern Territory	15,265	792	15,479	731	+1.4
Australian Capital Territory	949	29	1,785	50	+88.1
	89,728	45	105,237	49	+17.3

Source: ABS 2012b, pp.11–12, 16–17

Between 2006 and 2011, the homeless population increased unevenly in different states. As Table 6 demonstrates, in New South Wales the number of people who were homeless increased from 22 200 in 2006 to 28 200 in 2011, an increase of 26.8 per cent. In Victoria it increased from 17 400 to 22 800, an increase of 30.9 per cent, and in Tasmania from 1145 to 1579, an increase of 37.9 per cent. However, the increase was sharpest in the Australian Capital Territory where the population of people recorded as homeless almost doubled from 949 people in 2006 to 1785 in 2011, an increase of 88 per cent.

In contrast, the homeless population rose by only 6.7 per cent in South Australia (about 300 people), 5.2 per cent in Queensland (1000 people) and 1.4 per cent in the Northern Territory (200 people). It is not clear why homelessness increased substantially in some states relative to others when there was a national effort led by the Australian Government to reduce homelessness in all states and territories.

## 4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This chapter examines the policy implications of moving from the cultural definition of homelessness to the ABS statistical definition. It focuses on six issues: the number of homeless people nationally; the number of homeless families; people in different age groups; Indigenous people; funding for the states and territories; and the housed-homeless.

There are a number of questions in respect to how well the ABS has counted various categories in the homeless population. However, these issues are outside the concern of this paper and the figures published by the ABS are therefore taken on face value.

### 4.1 Number of homeless people

The implication of the broader ABS operational definition of homelessness is that the population of people who are homeless is larger than previously thought. In order to understand this relationship it is useful to compare the number of people recorded as homeless by the 2006 and 2011 Censuses using the ABS statistical definition and the cultural definition.

The first five operational categories used by the ABS in the statistical definition (Table 2, Section 2.6) are similar to the operational categories used in the cultural definition. However, the cultural definition includes all people in these operational categories, whereas the ABS definition excludes people from the count who have chosen homelessness. As this number was not reported by the ABS, the estimates using the cultural definition cannot include them.

**Table 7: Number of homeless people, cultural and ABS definitions, 2006 and 2011**

	2006	2011	Increase
	N	N	%
Improvised dwellings	7,247	6,813	-6.0
Supported accommodation	17,329	21,258	+22.7
Temporarily with other households	17,663	17,369	-1.7
Boarding houses	15,460	17,721	+14.6
Other temporary lodgings	500	686	+37.2
<i>Cultural definition (total)</i>	<i>58,199</i>	<i>63,847</i>	<i>+9.7</i>
Overcrowded dwellings	31,531	41,390	+31.3
<i>ABS definition (total)</i>	<i>89,728</i>	<i>105,237</i>	<i>+17.3</i>

Source: ABS 2012b, pp.16–17

Table 7 shows that, using the cultural definition, the number of homeless people increased from 58 199 in 2006 to 63 847 in 2011. This was an increase of 9.7 per cent. However, using the ABS statistical definition, the number of people who were homeless increased from 89 728 to 105 237, an increase of 17.3 per cent. The percentage increase using the ABS definition of homelessness was almost double because the housed-homeless were the largest group in the population (41 390 in 2011) and their numbers increased by 31.3 per cent between 2006 and 2011.

## 4.2 Families

The second consequence of moving from the cultural definition to the ABS statistical definition is that it increases the number of families in the homeless population. However, it is not possible to provide exact figures on the size of the increase because the ABS only provides information on the number of families in overcrowded dwellings. Nonetheless, we can use data from *Counting the Homeless 2006* (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008) to estimate the number of families in the other sectors of the population.

**Table 8: Number of persons by household type, overcrowded dwellings**

Household composition	N		%	
One family household	13,546	38,543	33	93
Multiple family household	24,997		60	
Single person household	0		0	
Group household	2,848		7	
	41,391		100	

Source: ABS 2012b, p.53

Table 8 shows that 93 per cent of people in overcrowded dwellings were in family households, accounting for 38 500 people. It will be assumed that one-quarter (26%) of people in the other homeless categories were in families (about 16 600 people), using the figures reported in *Counting the Homeless 2006* (Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2008, pp.26–27). Using the ABS definition, this means that in 2011 about half (52%) of all homeless people were in families ( $38\,543 + 16\,600 = 55\,143 / 105\,237 = 52\%$ ). This compares with about one-quarter of homeless people in families when the cultural definition is applied.

The fact that half of the homeless are in families using the new definition raises major challenges for policy-makers. In particular, what services are needed for families experiencing housed-homelessness? Is it simply a matter of moving these families into larger dwellings, or do they need other services to make them feel safe, secure and supported in their accommodation? It is well-known that people in overcrowded dwellings rarely seek assistance from homelessness services, so how will these services be delivered?

## 4.3 Different age groups

One consequence of including an additional 38 500 people in families as part of the homeless population is that it reduces the proportion of older people, and increases the number of younger people, who are homeless. This is important because of the potential for policy-makers and others to suggest that resources should be shifted from older homeless people to their younger counterparts.

Table 9 shows that, using the cultural definition, 19 per cent of homeless people at the time of the 2011 Census were aged 55 or older. However, this fell to 14.1 per cent when the ABS definition was employed, a decrease of 26 per cent. In contrast, the proportion of homeless people aged 24 or younger rose from 31.8 per cent (cultural definition) to 41.9 per cent (ABS definition), an increase of 32 per cent. On face value, this would seem to provide a compelling case for directing more resources towards the younger age groups.

**Table 9: Age of homeless people, cultural and ABS definitions, 2011**

Age (years)	Cultural definition			ABS definition		
	N	%	%	N	%	%
Under 12	7,774	12.2		17,845	17.0	
12–18	4,774	7.4	31.8	10,913	10.4	41.9
19–24	7,755	12.2		15,325	14.5	
25–34	11,965	18.8		19,312	18.3	
35–44	10,246	16.0	49.2	14,484	13.8	44.0
45–54	9,191	14.4		12,507	11.9	
55–64	7,097	11.1		8,649	8.2	
65–74	3,536	5.5	19.0	4,174	4.0	14.1
75 and over	1,509	2.4		2,028	1.9	
	63,847	100.0		105,237	100.0	

Source: ABS 2012b, pp.16–17

These findings raise additional dilemmas for policy-makers because there is substantial undercounting in the 12–18 age group. Homeless teenagers are undercounted in the Census because many of them stay temporarily with other households (Chamberlain & Mackenzie 2008, pp.18–20). This is known as ‘couch surfing’. After David MacKenzie and I completed the ABS National Census of Homeless School Students in 2006, we visited 173 schools across the country. School welfare staff reported that most homeless school students were ‘couch surfers’.

In *Counting the Homeless 2006* (Chamberlain & Mackenzie 2008), findings from the National Census of Homeless School Students were used to try to correct for undercounting in the Census. It was estimated that there were 21 940 homeless teenagers on Census night 2006 of whom 74 per cent were staying temporarily with other households (‘couch surfing’) (Table 10). The ABS did not undertake a National Census of Homeless School Students in 2011, instead preferring to rely on Census data. They have subsequently acknowledged that ‘couch surfers’ are undercounted in the Census, and have been developing a new methodology for counting them.

Drawing on 2011 Census data, the ABS estimated that there were only 10 913 homeless teenagers, with 56 per cent living in overcrowded dwellings, 28 per cent in supported accommodation for the homeless and 8 per cent staying temporarily with friends or relatives (‘couch surfing’) (Table 10). These findings send the wrong message to policy-makers about the size and characteristics of the youth homeless population.

**Table 10: Homeless youth aged 12–18 years: two estimates**

	Counting the homeless, 2006		ABS, 2011	
	N	%	N	%
Improvised dwellings, tents or sleepers out	1,304	6	368	3
Supported accommodation for the homeless	3,346	15	3,016	28
Staying temporarily with other households	16,116	74	890	8
Boarding houses	1,174	5	483	5
Other temporary lodgings	*		17	*
Overcrowded dwellings	*		6,139	56
	21,940	100	10,913	100

Sources: ABS 2012b, pp.16–17 and Counting the Homeless 2006 (unpublished data)

#### 4.4 Indigenous people

Indigenous people constitute only 2.5 per cent of the total Australian population but are over-represented among the homeless. Table 11 shows that using the cultural definition Indigenous people represented 11.9 per cent of the homeless population on Census night 2011.

However, when using the ABS definition, Indigenous people represent 27.6 per cent of the homeless population. This is because the ABS includes people in severely overcrowded dwellings as homeless, and Indigenous people were 49 per cent of this category (Table 11). There is no doubt that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in overcrowded dwellings deserve better accommodation, but should we re-name their problem as ‘homelessness’?

**Table 11: Indigenous and non-Indigenous homelessness, cultural and ABS definitions, 2011\***

	Indigenous	Non-Indigenous	Total	% Indigenous
	N	N	N	%
Improvised dwellings	1,679	4,699	6,378	26.3
Supported accommodation	3,282	14,314	17,596	18.7
Temporarily with other households	1,009	16,004	17,013	5.9
Boarding houses	678	13,727	14,405	4.7
Other temporary lodgings	44	628	672	6.6
<i>Cultural definition (total)</i>	<i>6,692</i>	<i>49,372</i>	<i>56,064*</i>	<i>11.9</i>
Overcrowded dwellings	20,052	20,713	40,765	49.2
<i>ABS definition (total)</i>	<i>26,744</i>	<i>70,085</i>	<i>96,829*</i>	<i>27.6</i>

\* No information on 8408 people.

Source: ABS 2012b, pp.25–27

## 4.5 States and territories

The Australian Government's funding under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) was allocated to the state and territory governments based on their respective share of the homeless population in 2006 (Auditor-General 2013). The move from the cultural definition of homelessness to the ABS definition implies that there should be a re-allocation of these funds.

Table 12 shows that the Northern Territory's share of the homeless population increases from 3.6 to 14.7 per cent using the ABS definition, and Western Australia's share increases from 8.5 to 9.1 per cent. These states are the major beneficiaries of the new formula because they have more people in the housed-homeless population.

All of the other states and territories can expect a smaller percentage of the funding distribution under the NAHA using the ABS definition of homelessness (Table 12). New South Wales' share of the population drops from 29.0 to 26.8 per cent; Victoria's share decreases from 26.2 to 21.7 per cent; and Queensland's share declines from 21.4 to 18.8 per cent. There are similar reductions in the other states: South Australia (from 6.7 to 5.7%); the ACT (from 2.4 to 1.7%); and Tasmania (from 2.2 to 1.5%).

It should be clear that the shift from the cultural definition to the ABS definition will have major consequences for how resources are allocated to state and territory governments in the future.

**Table 12: Geographical distribution of homeless people, cultural and ABS definitions, 2011**

	Cultural definition		ABS definition	
	N	%	N	%
New South Wales	18,531	29.0	28,190	26.8
Victoria	16,747	26.2	22,789	21.7
Queensland	13,649	21.4	19,838	18.8
South Australia	4,273	6.7	5,985	5.7
Western Australia	5,438	8.5	9,592	9.1
Tasmania	1,396	2.2	1,579	1.5
Northern Territory	2,308	3.6	15,479	14.7
Australian Capital Territory	1,505	2.4	1,785	1.7
	63,847	100.0	105,237	100.0

Source: ABS 2012b, pp.11–12, 16–17

## 4.6 People experiencing housed-homelessness

It will be recalled that the ABS statistical definition classifies some people living in conventional houses and flats as homeless if:

- Their dwelling is inadequate.
- They have no security of tenure.
- They do not have space for social relations.

First, we need to quantify this population.

*Adequacy of the dwelling* covers whether the dwelling is being used in accordance with building and zoning regulations, and whether it has an adequate kitchen and bathroom. However, the Census does not gather information on these elements and

people living in substandard dwellings subsequently were not represented in ABS estimates of homelessness in either the 2006 or 2011 Census.

The second element concerns *security of the dwelling*. Under the ABS definition people who rent housing are homeless if they do not have a lease providing security of tenure. The 2011 Census did not ask if tenants had a lease arrangement and people in this segment of the homeless population could not be identified.

The third element in the ABS conceptual framework is *access to space for social relations*. This covers whether a household has control over and access to private space in order to pursue 'normal' social relations. Most importantly, the dwelling must provide a safe environment where people reasonably feel supported and affirmed. It is possible to mount the argument that there were many people who should have been classified as homeless when this criterion was applied but were not identified in the enumeration. Three examples illustrate this point.

First, women living in suburban houses will not feel safe and secure if they have violent partners (they are 'housed' rather than 'homed', see ABS 2012a, p.31 for a discussion of this issue). Women in this situation are clearly homeless according to the criteria specified in the ABS definition but again were not included in 2011 Census estimates.

Second, teenagers who are physically or sexually assaulted by family or other household members will not feel safe and supported at home. It is common for it to take months or years before physical or sexual assault comes to the notice of the authorities. Young men and women who are victims of physical or sexual assault are homeless according to the ABS conceptual framework, but again they cannot be identified in the Census.

Third, people who have severe mental health problems may believe that other family members are trying to harm them. They may live in suburban houses but feel no connection with other family members. As far as they are concerned, they do not have a 'home' and do not feel safe and supported.

People in the three groups described above were homeless according to the criteria specified in the ABS conceptual framework but were not included in ABS homelessness estimates. Rather, the only people who were included were those living in overcrowded dwellings and, as previously discussed, the criteria for their inclusion—or exclusion—was at times dubious.

It has been noted that women and children experiencing domestic or family violence are homeless according to the ABS conceptual framework. Why, then, were they not included in the ABS homeless estimates? The ABS notes:

A person experiencing the violence who remains in their unsafe house with the perpetrator, could be considered to lack control of and access to social relations. However, assessing these situations in a measurement context is very difficult, and the ABS definition currently excludes such situations from its definition of homelessness .... (ABS 2012a, p.15)

The ABS is correct to point out that it is very difficult to enumerate people experiencing domestic or family violence, but someone in this situation is clearly homeless according to the criteria spelled out in the ABS conceptual framework. There is another word for this problem. It is called undercounting.

As we have seen, the housed-homeless population comprises a wide range of people. However, only those in overcrowded dwellings were counted in the 2011 Census. Young people living in family households where there was physical and sexual assault

were not counted, nor were mentally ill people who felt persecuted by other family members. In addition, people living in conventional houses with inadequate facilities were not included in the ABS estimate of homelessness, nor were people renting flats without security of tenure.

The ABS could legitimately argue that it is not possible to count any of these groups using Census data. But this is precisely the point. The ABS set out to develop a definition of homelessness that could be used for statistical purposes but their definition is difficult to operationalise using existing Census data.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This Essay set out to evaluate the new statistical definition of homelessness adopted by the ABS and to discuss the policy implications of moving from the cultural definition to the ABS definition. The core categories of the cultural definition (primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness) were grounded in evidence and resonated with what service providers knew from their direct experience of working with homeless clients. The categories in the cultural definition were widely accepted by policy-makers in the late 1990s and they have become embedded in the Australian discourse on homelessness since that time. Moreover, the cultural definition could be operationalised using Census data and the ABS published four reports using this framework (Chamberlain 1999; Chamberlain & MacKenzie 2003, 2008; ABS 2011).

Many service providers and policy-makers became articulate exponents of the cultural definition as an appropriate definition for policy and planning purposes. The cultural definition is also easy to understand. It mirrors the experience of people who become homeless and their transition from temporary accommodation with friends or relatives to emergency and insecure housing, such as caravan parks, motel rooms and boarding houses.

The ABS definition is more difficult to explain to the broader community. This is because the ABS definition contends that some homeless people live in houses and flats. The idea of 'housed-homelessness' is counter-intuitive to people in the general community for good reason. People living in houses may be *at risk* of homelessness, but they are not 'homeless' while they remain housed.

According to the ABS, the housed-homeless are the largest group in the homeless population, up from 31 531 in 2006 to 41 390 in 2011. However, these figures potentially understate the extent of housed-homelessness if the criteria specified in the ABS conceptual framework are applied. Not identified in the Census, for example, are:

- Women and children experiencing domestic or family violence.
- Children and young people in families where there is physical or sexual violence.
- People with a mental illness who feel persecuted by other family members.
- People living in houses that have inadequate facilities.
- People renting accommodation without security of tenure.

This population has the potential to contribute significantly to the number of people classified as housed-homeless (see Section 4.6). If, for arguments sake, a further 100 000 people should have been included in the count, then it would mean that about 70 per cent of all homeless people were in the housed-homeless population in 2011.

The undercounting of the housed-homeless means that it is not possible to specify the overall number of homeless people using the new ABS statistical definition, nor is it possible to specify the age and gender breakdown. This is important information for policy-makers and a major disadvantage of the ABS definition. The geographical distribution of the population is also thrown into doubt and has ramifications for the allocation of resources under the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) between the states and territories.

The ABS (2012a, 2012b) states repeatedly that it has developed a statistical definition of homelessness. But a statistical definition is one where the number of persons in the relevant categories can be quantified. This is an important criterion if a definition of

homelessness is to be used for policy and planning purposes. The ABS definition is broader than the cultural definition but difficult to operationalise using Census data and results in significant undercounting.

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